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SHELLEY AND NATURE

BY A. M. D. HUGHES

SHELLEY habitually regarded himself as a wanderer among men, often with self-pity, but oftener with pride. During his life he never succeeded in keeping a home, and can scarcely be said to have had a country. The very word "homeless" has a suggestion when he uses it of freedom and joy, and his favorite landscapes are manless places,—forests, wastes, seas, river gorges, and mountain steeps. It was as hard for him to curb himself in a sphere as to stop the rings from spreading outward when he played at ducks and drakes; and his mind was ever spreading in the same way from Man to Nature and from Nature to God; so that earth, merged in heaven, is viewed simply as the robe or veil of God. Now the *anima mundi* of Shelley is his own spirit writ large—never resting, as in Wordsworth, in a "central peace," but always in a troublous aspiration. And Nature, as he sees her, is the image of her Soul. By a pre-established harmony his strength and weakness as an observer conspire perfectly with his metaphysical idea, and as in his thought all things seethe and pulse in desire together, so in his vision all things are in a flux and a burning energy. Infinity, then, whether it appear in form and extent, or motion, or power, is Shelley's distinctive note. It is characteristic of Wordsworth, and to a lesser degree of Coleridge also, to brood over some small spot of earth and elicit its "soul"—a mountain tarn or dell, the bend of a river, a lake with its circle of hills. Keats needed no other food for his eager and exquisite senses than the familiar beauty of the southern counties, wood and stream, flower and field; and such is his "warm and feeling heart" for "Nature's gentle doings" that, as he himself declared, to look away to the distance is to lose pleasure.

But it is just the distances that Shelley instinctively seeks, the

Islanded seas, blue mountains, mighty streams
Dim tracts and vast,

and "all waste and solitary places",

Where we taste
The pleasure of believing what we see
Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be.

Ruskin has told us in *Modern Painters* that the common love of a lighted background in a picture or a scene is a spiritual attribute and kindred to the love of liberty. No gorge or forest walk in Shelley but sky or starlight will give the escape, and the scenes he most loves, like his desired Aegean paradise, are

Twixt Heaven, Air, Earth, and Sea
Cradled, and hung in clear tranquility,

and "washed by blue oceans of air"; nor is any other English poet so regardful of sun, and star, and cloud, and the "deep wildernesses of heaven." For the one vision in many aspects that he desires to see is that of the Divine Influence in grand and resistless power. He began in poetry by trying to portray it sweeping through the hearts of men,—and failed. In *The Revolt of Islam*, for instance, the most ambitious of his earlier works, he would recall the great days of 1789, when a whole people shook like reeds together to the word of liberty. But the men and women of the tale are mere shadows that melt in the glory instead of shining with it. In Nature it is otherwise. In terms of Nature he can show forth the Spirit of Beauty "going from end to end" as he never could in terms of Man. True, his deepest experience is always the visitation of the Spirit in his own heart; but if in himself he can see it deep, it is only in earth and sky that he sees it wide. And the wider the better; there must be no stint or stay, no border or bourn.

He desires, then, an endless flow of energy to be the emblem of the Power "that penetrates and clasps and fills the world." And he has it most conspicuously in motion and light. Consequently, whatever checks or pens that flow—all fixed lines and shapes, all things massive or stiff, in a word, any self-insistent form—is an impediment to his imagination. In this respect he offers a striking contrast,

and at the same time a striking resemblance, to Browning. Professor Herford, in his penetrating study of Browning, has noted his savage joy in toothed and jagged outlines and stark and salient peaks. Shelley, on the other hand, regards these things almost always with horror, as in the case of the serpent jaws on the head of da Vinci's Medusa, or the prickly and blistering vegetation in the rotting garden of *The Sensitive Plant*, or the torture-wheels fished up from the wrecks of the Armada on the Cornish Coast.¹ It is true that he rejoices in spires and clear-cut forms rising into the sky; but always and only when the light has turned them, as it were, to spirit or flame. Looking at a splendid sunrise from the Euganean Hills, he sees the towers and columns of Venice shining "like obelisks of fire," and pointing upwards from the sea floor "with an inconstant motion," like a burning sacrifice. So, too, he is fond of the flexuous and dissolving shapes of fire or rushing water. Or he will have his way by means of the intricacy of the lines. Browning delighted in a labyrinth or in any rough and much articulated surface for the joy of tracing the pattern. Like him, Shelley is often busy with tracery or veining in leaf or rind or stone, with tangled fibres and knotted roots, with the checker of leaves against the sky or shade or the ground, with the network of cloud or rock or ice, and the windings of caverns and forest paths; not, however, for form's sake, but for its confusion,—because the pattern is indeterminate and the eye is free to roam. He can never describe clearly a room or a street, or the things men make and use, for these are definite. In *Charles the First* he makes perhaps his one attempt at this sort of scenery, in the passage on the view of London from one of the bridges, but it altogether misses fire; and his nearest sight of Venice is at a moment when the city and hills are "huddled" into one eerie fabric in a blazing sunset. But he is quick to seize on the visual delusions that loosen the consistency of the scene. His mountain peaks "pierce the heavens like things not belonging to this earth," and his parasites "flow" round the trees "like restless serpents." He loved the mountains, and was affected at sight of the Alps "by an ecstatic wonder not unallied to madness." But no image such as that of Browning's hills "like the teeth in an old lion's jaw" would ever have come from his pen. He saw these masses through

¹ *Letter to Maria Gisborne*, 85. The description of the engineer's workshop in this poem is in the grotesque and illustrates the point. Cf. *Hellas* 857.

mist or sheen or "islanded in immeasurable air," or floating in moonlight, or levelled with the plain by noontide haze,—changeable as cloud. The Apennine, that rested all day, a gray shadow "twixt earth and sky," is dissolved by the night and the wind to a chaos of noise and darkness, and "walks abroad with the storm."

Thus there is nothing left immovable under the moon; matter is a mere surd and almost a shade; and his whole endeavor is to turn it into the thinnest medium of energy. His whole world is quick, pure, and light—quivering, swaying, dancing, darting, eddying. He dwells indeed at times on the calms in Nature; but the calms have always in them an "ardour of rest and love," like the stormy waters soothed by the blue of heaven, and "tremulous with soft influence." And they are rare episodes. For the most part the earth is full of speed, and the "chorus of the stars" dance "like fireflies" or a "swarm of golden bees." Hence his marked fondness for winged insects,—for the beam-like ephemeris whose path is like lightning's,—and among animals for the antelope, and his admiration of the ascetic type of human beauty,—of steps that "seem to pity the grass," "quivering hands as white as snow," limbs as quick with soul "as the atoms of the mountain drift with the winter wind." A ray, a wind, a cloud of dew, a spark or flash of fire are his choice of moving things. Nay, the gradual happenings of the day and the year are sudden and instant in his poetry. The grass "starts to feel the sun," the "evening peace" is "snapt" by the sunset, the buds in spring "leap from their detested trance," the green lizard and the golden snake issue "like unimprisoned flames."

The other chief agency for the spiritualising of matter is color and light that run like music from fine to fierce and steep the scene and the sense. He is exclusive, indeed, as a colorist, but very delicate, and the world, when he looks upon it, shines and flashes with a strange radiance, like the serpent in the Spring. Other poets may have seen the blossoms gleaming from their coverts "like gems under a miner's lamp," or starring the grass "like an infant's smile"; a few may take as subtle notes as that of the rooks flashing out of cloud into sunlight over the Euganean Hills with the dew gleaming "in golden spots on wings of purple grain." But fewer still are equally observant of spent lights and "dun ethereal glooms," or the glimmer of glow-worm or star,

or the pallor of moonlit flowers, or the faint sheen from rose or lily on overhanging leaves. It is almost with a second sight that he speaks so often of a kind of luminous *aura* shrouding and, as it were, dissolving the body and the face, "undulating" with the "mazes" of motions and looks, burning through the raiment, and "making the cold air fire." But the means whereby his world is the image of its Soul consist, in respect of color and light, not alone in the vividness and exigency of the sense, but other qualities converge with these: (a) His hues are not warm and rich like Keats's, or bold like Browning's, but lucent and liquid,—that is to say, clear and groundless, as though every mote of matter were sifted away. (b) There are very few such strident contrasts as Browning loved, but each spot of color is congenial to its neighbors. He rejoices in the mingling or merging of the strains,—pale azure fading into silver on a shell or a serpent's mail, wings of skyey grain where "orange and azure deepen into gold," or the "tender interfusion" of gold and violet in meadows after rain. Or he puts together the kindred tints; cypress tops in blue air, purple mountains in the orange light of dawn, golden wings in a dun mist. (c) And all that liquid harmony is consummated by what he calls the "interfusion" or "interpenetration" of the hues, by a sum of light where each hue gives and takes, and all burn together. This was in part the fascination that always drew his steps to the nearest river or lake or pond. Sky and tree, as reflected in the clear water, were brighter and softer than themselves, and all the elements of the picture communed more perfectly than in daylight in the elemental glow. (d) But this glory is never quiet. It pulses, trembles, or is caught in flashing by. More especially, the deep dramatic instinct in Shelley reveals itself in the treatment of light, as it also does in his awe at the coming on of storm. His sunset is never like Wordsworth's,—

the silent spectacle—the gleam,
The shadow—and the peace supreme.

But it deepens on and up to the "last red agony," or until sea and land are "dissolved as in one lake of fire." So too the moonlight scene in *Alastor* gathers to the point where all Nature hangs, as it were, on the one last ray, and the day-break in the second act of *Prometheus*, to the moment when the light is far flung over peaks and dales, and the icy

summits fling it up as a rock the sea spray. As the hours wear on, mist and haze are withdrawn, "veil after veil," until in the meridian "interfusion" the earth is "as a naked bride glowing with love and loveliness." It seems as if the intensity can go no further, and all color must wilt and whiten beneath it.

The same keen but partial sensibility is shown in his apprehension of sound and scent. His hearing is nowhere near as discriminative as Wordsworth's, whose master faculty it was. Shelley can read and mark Nature as well as any if he needs to do so, and he does so by the way. But the scheme of his vision is far too large for more than a chance few of the minuter observations. As his manner is, however, he abounds in exquisite versions of the simpler and grander effects. Who that can savor the odor of poetry will doubt whose hand it was that wrote of "lulling snows that beat with their soft flakes the mountain side," or of the spotted deer lying in the moonlight,

and the slow silent night
Is measured by the pants of their calm sleep.

It is characteristic of him, too, that he listened with peculiar fondness to ceaseless and sea-like sound, as of the plying or pulsing of a boundless power,—“the universal air whispering from bough to bough,” the tumultuous harmonies of the autumn storm, or the “lone loud sound no other sound could tame” of the cataracts of the Arve.

The intensity and the refinement appear again in his love of flowers. Of these the richly scented abound in his poetry,—the jonquil, the tuberose, the lemon-flower, the musk, the jasmine. We hear of him swooning away on one occasion with the scent of a field of jonquils near Pisa. But this was not voluptuousness. Shelley, in comparison with ordinary men, indeed, is one of the ascetics; not one who refused to touch and taste, but one in whom sensation is always the base and food of the exalted mind, and the very keenness of his perceptions a sign of austerity. Thus he is not less tender to the shy and dowerless flowers, and to the faint and frail,—the laurel, the anemone, the “moon-folded eglantine,” the blue-bell, and above all the violet, that

While yet its leaves with nightly dews are wet,
Breathes in prophetic dreams of day's uprise.

We are told on the one hand by Medwin that Shelley was deep in the love of the plants and could name them all, and on the other by Hogg that he knew less about them, and observed them less, than most other men. It is certain that only one of the trees appeals to his imagination,—the scathed and solitary pine in the path of the glacier or the mountain wind, “the Ahasuerus of the mountains,” as it has been well called; and for the rest he hardly knows one from another. But there is that in flowers that rooted his attention. *The Sensitive Plant* and *The Question* could not have been written by one who did not study them, though the study was probably late in coming, since it is only the later poems that indicate it. Hardly any other poet can fable so winsomely of all the life of these “incarnations of the stars,” for hardly any other is so conscious of “the shadow of humanity” in Nature.

This quick and restless world, with its high lights and keen hues, is plainly a transfiguration of the real. There is nothing drab or neutral here. There is little said of Winter, unless it is of its snow and ice, or of the sober-suited weeks of the late summer. Even the “childhood of sweet June” is a little scantied of praise. It is almost always autumn or spring; not mellow or mild, as in the quieter poets, but in flagrant power. It is the world of a lucent dream, where any strange thing is in place, where the Lady of Atlas and the miraculous beasts and plants from Lucan or Pliny or elsewhere are all indigenous creatures, and it is no fallacy, but the only language that avails, when he turns his winds and stars to ensouled and impassioned beings at war or love or play.

There is another regard in which the charge of “unreality” to some extent holds good. Who but Shelley would write that a river breaks its barrier “as a flash pierces a vapour”? It is all like that—all force and no fight. His swift planets and waters remind us of that “vast agility” with which he would dash unhindered, as Hogg tells us, through the London crowds. The storm is never presented by him under the aspect of destruction, but only as an ecstasy of Nature. The constituents of his physical universe are like the men of his ideal state; they live and move together with no control and no collision. Browning with his solid hills, Wordsworth with his “stars in their old haunts,” could never thus conceive. It could only be done in a world so

loose and phantasmal, and in the lack of the structural imagination. And it is in virtue of the same habit of mind in another area of vision—the same incoherence—that he can often see the dæmonic energies of animated life apart from the havoc they involve. His scenes are peopled with fierce and gorgeous birds and beasts from the Orient or the realms of fable: the lion, the leopard, the tiger, the hyena, the ounce; the basilisk and all kinds of serpents; the eagle, the vulture, the dogfish, and the shark. He is fascinated by the fury of the hunt, by the mute fear of brute and bird at the coming of the tempest, by the rush of forest herds ringed round with fire. But he manages at the same time to forget the issues of outrage and death, to isolate the panic trance, and blot out the evil in the grandeur of terror or the beauty of prowess.

Unreal! Inconclusive! Yes; but it is all the other side of his special power. His power lies not only in recovering the primitive excitement that made the myths and saw Nature as a tissue of fiery wills in strange shapes; but it lies also in the crowning or supervening sense of one ocean of incontinent and immeasurable splendor that merges all the lights. This is indeed the "living robe of God." And he uses the same magic when he deals with emotion and thought. He speaks of the spirit of man as a ravine through which the images of truth sweep like a river, a tossing sea under truth's beams, a dim desert where dreams wander, an atmosphere with its aspirations

Voyaging cloud-like and unpent
Through the boundless element.

And the thoughts are sudden, casual, incalculable, like shafts of light, or gliding shadows or clouds, or swift and beauteous beasts, or, in time of stir, like the lights and sounds that blaze and roll among the Alpine towers, when the storm is afoot, and the pale dalesmen watch in fear. It is as if he had burst the bar between the pool of the individual consciousness and the open sea of Mind.

His world, then, with all its swift forces, is a gentle world, and battle and outrage are put away. But, though his horror of violence remains with him to the end, he grew stronger year by year to face evil and noisomeness in other forms. The intense justice of the picture of the obscene rottenness and briary malignity in the garden of *The Sensitive Plant*,

the curious study of the foul sea swamp in *Mareugli*,—these are the promise and potency of a gift which might have made him a master of the grotesque, and of which he lived to create one great monument—*The Triumph of Life*. For, after all, he was rooted and grounded in sense,—and was fascinated by reality in all its aspects even when he shrank from it. The philosopher in him might sometimes contend against the poet; so that he doubted which of these two he really was. But even in his prose essays he cannot talk of the Divinity he worshipped without showing that it is revealed to him in “a mist of sense and thought”,—

Be it love, light, harmony,
Odor, or the Soul of all;

and if he longed for a sort of Nirvana, it was a state

Where music and moonlight and feeling are one.

And all this surging universe, at once so spectral and so quick, this extreme glory that is still the dædal world and not a blank light, and “trembles ever, but does not pass away,” is the offspring and the image of that midway mind which Browning says is the distinctive mark of Shelley’s work among all the moderns—that just balance, ever juster with every year he lived, between one leaning to the real and the seen and another to the unseen and the eternal.

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